

Bridging the Language Gap: Employees Learn Spanish

An officer stops a speeding vehicle, walks alongside and speaks to the driver through the passenger side window. He asks for the motorist's driver's license.

Motorist: Oficial, perdoneme, pero yo no hablo ingles.”
(Officer, pardon me, but I don't speak English.)

Officer: Buenos Días, Señor. Lo pare porque usted estaba manejando a alta velocidad. Puedo ver su licencia de manejar?” (Good morning, Sir. I stopped you because you were speeding. May I see your driver's license?)

Motorist responds rapidly in Spanish, apparently explaining his speed.

Officer: Señor, por favor hable más despacio, yo no hablo mucho español. (Sir, speak slower please. I do not speak very much Spanish.)

Traffic officers encounter situations daily demanding Spanish language skills. If the officers have had job-specific language training, they can communicate. If not, a traffic stop or a truck inspection can escalate into misunderstanding or dangerous situation.

A Spanish language program instituted by the California Highway Patrol is bridging this language gap. Cadets are trained in basic law enforcement tasks in both English and Spanish. Officers are able, after the training, to cite a speeder, assist a motorist or conduct a truck inspection. The Department's El Protector officers are polishing their

Spanish so they can communicate more effectively on Spanish-language television and to ethnic community groups.

Language training promotes understanding between the CHP and the public and diffuses tense situations that develop when an officer and a citizen don't understand each other.

In California, limited English-speaking drivers are an increasing percentage of motorists. Univision, the largest Spanish-language television network in the US, estimates Spanish is the predominant language in 58 percent of Los Angeles households; 51 percent in Fresno, 51 percent in San Diego and 48 percent in San Francisco.

The CHP's efforts are rare among law enforcement agencies. “Very few others teach officers Spanish. LAPD is one,” said Diego Flores, officer in charge of Spanish language training at the CHP Academy in West Sacramento.

The Academy offers three Spanish language programs, all job-specific and all readily usable in real-life law enforcement situations. Other languages, such as Vietnamese, Chinese and Hmong, are spoken by officers assigned to particular area offices, but no formal training is offered.

The first Spanish-oriented program is a 90-hour unit for cadets begun in 1994 following a use-of-force study by a citizen's committee which recommended Spanish training.

Instructors teach cadets the Spanish words for the basic procedures the students are also learning in English, such as traffic violations, arrest techniques and field sobriety tests. The cadets learn vocabulary and sentence structure in part one and step-by-step enforcement techniques in part two.

On one recent day, cadets practiced on a partner the basic misdemeanor arrest procedure. In halting Spanish, they told their mock suspect to turn around, clasp his hands behind his head, separate his feet, etc. Later in the course cadets take a test on a similar scenario.

“We don’t teach enough Spanish so they’re bilingual by the time they leave the program. It’s very agency-specific Spanish, the meat and potatoes of what we do as officers,” said Flores.

Cadet Brett Fabbri, who formerly served on a city police force for seven years, said Spanish would have been a big benefit. “I was on a drug task force and really needed it,” Fabbri said.

With the success of the program, the CHP in 1998 expanded training to officers as well as cadets. The 40-hour voluntary course has been received enthusiastically.

“You won’t believe it, but my first DUI check on my first night back on graveyard was a sheriff’s turnover,” said Officer Javad Mostoufi of the Riverside Area office in an e-mail message to Flores. “The deputy told me the driver didn’t speak any English and he wasn’t exaggerating. I did the investigation and made the arrest. It was like magic; the guy understood and we communicated very easily.”



OFFICER DIEGO FLORES takes his cadet Spanish class step-by-step through an arrest.

The truck inspection course focuses on the highly colloquial vocabulary needed to complete a mechanical inspection. CHP received a federal grant in 1996 to start inspection classes following the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The agreement eventually will allow truck drivers from neighboring countries to travel freely in the US.

The CHP increased its border inspection facilities to handle the surge. Sergeant Gregory Peck, who designed the truck inspection classes, got on-the-spot lessons from Spanish-speaking truckers. “I went to Otay Mesa Inspection Facility for a month and watched inspections and said, ‘How do you say this?’ and ‘What’s this called?’” Peck said.

He trained about 300 officers and civilian inspectors. It was so successful the commercial language classes are being added to the Department’s regular training schedule.

A third area in which the CHP is augmenting training is its El Protector program. Started in Central Division in 1986, El Protector is a nationally-recognized community service effort by Spanish-speaking officers to a segment of the public that in the past has avoided law enforcement.

El Protector officers are assigned full-time to educate the public about California traffic laws and traffic safety through appearances at public meetings, fairs, ethnic celebrations and child safety seat clinics. They are assisted by a group of bilingual road officers called “aliados” who help out as needed.

The Department currently is identifying El Protector officers and aliados with advanced Spanish skills who can speak effectively to Spanish radio and television. At the same time, bilingual officers who wish to gain advanced skills will be receiving additional training.

“Spanish language is a training option that fits our goals for the 21st century,” Flores said. “The CHP wants to provide excellent community service. The more Spanish-speaking officers we have, the better service we give the public.”